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Two Linguists on Freshman English: Pressure from Below.

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The importance of improving English instructors' attitudes toward three broadly classified forms of language expression is examined. The author notes an increased interest in languages among college freshmen and defines the differences between (1) artistic, (2) playful, and (3) intellectual expression. Pressure resulting from advanced teaching methodology and newly developed curriculums, particularly in linguistics, in the secondary school will be felt increasingly as student expectations concerning English faculty attitudes are not realized in the colleges. (AF)

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PRESSURE FROM BELOW

I predict that within a decade or so the superior freshman reaching college from a good high school will know more and have thought more about language and will be more interested in it than his instructors. To a limited degree this is already the case: well known programs like those of Westport, Connecticut, and Portland, Oregon, are representative of a development which is going on in many school systems all over the country. Last fall my colleague Freeman Twaddell, in the opening meeting of an introductory course in linguistics for selected freshmen, asked how many knew what a phoneme is. Ten out of twelve raised their hands, and most of them were able to produce acceptable definitions. Would a representative group of freshman English instructors make as good a showing?

I am not advocating that instructors teach linguistics in freshman English. Language is the medium of writing; ideas are its substance, and certainly by the time a student reaches college 90% of his instruction in writing should deal with the substance. But there should be a channel of communication about the language, so that instructor and student may discuss it efficiently. Many secondary schools have found this out; more are doing so every year. The student who has become used to discussion of language in the objective and careful language of linguistics will be rather surprised and not a little disillusioned to find that his freshman instructor can't take part in dialogue of this sort.

Furthermore, these students are going to be *interested* in language and expect their instructors to be also. There are, of course, different forms which interest in language takes. I might mention three here: the artistic (or to use an at present overused word, the creative), the playful, and the intellectual.

The artistic interest in language is pretty much beyond our control, fortunately. The fascination with words and their grammatical arrangements and dislocations that is shared by writers otherwise as diverse as the author of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, Shakespeare, Spenser, Pope, Browning, E. E. Cummings, and Dylan Thomas seems to be inherited rather than learned, though no doubt it can be both fostered and blighted. In the nature of things it is rare; not many students in freshman English have it to any high degree. I believe that if one of them showed up in a freshman English course I would try to get him out as quickly as possible before his natural love of language suffered blight. Or perhaps it would be better to let freshman English serve as a kind of trial by fire and water. If his love for language survived the ordeal, like that of Mozart's Tamino and Pamina it would prove its durability. I doubt that many Miltons are mute and inglorious because of a traumatic experience in freshman English.

The second kind of interest, which I have called playful, is much more widespread—it shows itself in childhood wordplay, adolescent slang and double-talk, often derivative, but natural and exciting. In general the schools have made it their business to kill this kind of playful interest, and they have had the backing of society in this effort. Sober folk think these are but wild and whirling words, a dangerous indulgence for those who must be responsible for what they say as well as what they do. But killing the irresponsibility may also kill the interest. And killing the interest may impair skill or cast doubt upon its value. Certainly most professionals with highly developed skills are fond of playing with those skills. Watch the Harlem Globetrotters, Mickey Mantle, or the Aston Villa soccer team warming up before a game; the very highest skill is used and sometimes parodied in clowning. In spite of the often overwhelming seriousness of our times, there are some areas where linguistic playfulness is at least tolerated if not encouraged. I think at random of Bing Crosby's delightful and delighted polysyllabicity; of the preposterous verbal will o' the wisps pursued by Howland Owl, Albert the Alligator, and other denizens of Walt Kelly's

Okefenokee; of Ogden Nash's disingenuously ingenuous amazement at the possibilities of rhyme; and of Mort Sahl's poker-faced dislocations of various kinds of in-group jargon. All of these are people with keen interest in language and great skill in its use who have preserved a youthful playfulness about it in spite of the pressures of society, and doubtless of their high school and freshman English instructors, to be serious and responsible.

The third kind of interest, the intellectual, marks the potential linguists. In spite of the curious canard leveled at linguists by those who don't know much about them —that it is their aim to destroy language— linguists are fascinated by language as a perennially interesting subject of study, analysis, and ~~dimension.~~ discussion. People with this interest also are rare in freshman English classes. Like the very different interest of the creators, this interest can neither be taught nor killed; it can, however, either be scorned and ridiculed, or else channeled and molded, given a kit of tools and some reassurance, and sent on to advanced work in linguistics. But English departments in our colleges and universities as they are usually constituted neither understand nor encourage this kind of interest; indeed, they scarcely tolerate it. I think of a bright sophomore at my own university, who came to me with a plan to have two complete majors, one in linguistics and one in English. She found she could do it if she could count a year course in the history of the English language, primarily for graduate students, in both. But the concentration adviser in English wouldn't permit it—it wasn't literature. So now she is a major in linguistics.

From the viewpoint of interest in language, then, we get three groups in our college classes: a small handful of creators, a somewhat larger handful of grammarians, and a middle group of untalented creators, unintelligent or hesitant grammarians, the generality whose interest may be limited to the playful. The interests of the first two groups have durability; the experience of the usual freshman English course may cut down their numbers, but this may be a desirable elimination process. There is little room in professional writing or advanced linguistics for the luke-warm and the second-rate. Our English departments feel some obligation toward the first group, as evidenced by courses in creative writing, the presence of professional writers on English staffs, and the publication of student literary magazines. Virtually nothing is done for the second group. Usually, like my sophomore friend, they are squeezed out of English departments entirely and are thus lost to the English-teaching profession except as teachers of English as a second language, usually in some foreign land. But it is with the middle group that the situation is changing. Schools are beginning to realize that their native interest in language can and should be fostered and developed rather than pushed off into the unorthodox channels of slang and word-games, if not altogether destroyed. The notion is getting about that an interest in language, given form and direction by some instruction in its nature and history, may both supply a worthwhile intellectual interest and increase attention to the practical skills of using language. Students who have had this kind of teaching in high school will increasingly expect their college instructors to show the same kind of knowledge and motivation as their high school teachers. Will they find them? Not, as things go now, without some pretty radical changes in the training of our freshman English instructors.

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